

The Genesis of English Education: the Role of Christian Missionaries in Bengal

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Abstract

English Language Education has been an important factor for the uplift and development of an individual in this twenty first century when English is regarded as a lingua franca in the countries formerly colonized by the British. In every stratum of the society we need to learn English to have an easeful life. But the vernacular elementary education provided by the *Pathshalas* earlier was inadequate as observed by British observers like William Ward, William Adam and Francis Buchanan. In this situation, the Christian missionaries established many schools in West Bengal from 1819 onwards with the aim of providing western education to the mass of Bengal for their socio-cultural betterment. At that time Christian missionaries like Alexander Duff, William Carey, established many schools for providing English Education in and around Calcutta. Again George Pearce founded an English school at Durgapur in 1827. In the late 1820's the missionaries achieved more success with the teaching of English. They made social and educational reform after Charter Act 1813 which permitted and financially helped them to spread English education in Bengal. This paper aims at unfolding the role played by those missionaries in spreading English education in Bengal.

Keywords: English Language Education, well being, Christian Missionaries, West Bengal

In modern times English has been the most important language and an important tool for the development of an individual. To fulfill the requirement of the English language education different kinds of government and private institutions are mushrooming in the countries like India, China and the African countries where English is regarded as the second language or foreign language. West Bengal, then Bengal, cannot also be escaped from this thread of English language learning. But earlier, especially, in the eighteenth century, the medium of learning in India, especially in Bengal, was very much vernacular. Then vernacular elementary education was catered in *Pathshalas*. The main purpose of the *Pathshalas* was the severely practiced one of qualifying boys for jobs that required literacy. William Ward observed that the typical *Pathsala* was “a mere shop, in which, by a certain process, the human being is prepared to act as a copying machine or as a lithographic process.” The medium of higher education in Bengal was Sanskrit for the Hindus and Persian for the Muslims. Institutes of elementary vernacular education were wide spread in both urban and rural areas. Quintin Craufurd (22 September 1743 – 23 November 1819) in his *Sketches Chiefly Relating to the History, Religion, Learning, and Manners, of the Hindoos: With a Concise Account of the Present State of the Native Powers of Hindostan*, Vol. II noted that “there are schools in all town and principal villages of Bengal.” The students in the elementary schools were given some lessons on the rules of arithmetic and accounts. The students sometimes went through some vernacular works like *Ramayana*, *Manasa Mangal*, *Ganga Bandana*, etc. The standard of education was not high. In this regard the ‘observations’

made by Charles Grant (16 April 1746 – 31 October 1823), a British politician influential in Indian and domestic affairs who, motivated by his evangelical Christianity, championed the causes of social reform and Christian mission, particularly in India, in *Observations on the State of Society Among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals, and on the Means of Improving it* are very crucial. In 1792, he had laid down the first blueprint on English education in India. It was intended that through English education Indian society can be modified psychologically, collectively and ethically. He had said that western knowledge in English as a medium of instruction would help to eradicate superstitious beliefs ubiquitous among uncivilized Indians. His suggestion of English education was adopted by William Bentinck about forty years later on the advocacy of Macaulay. After describing in great details the bad educational condition of the Indian society, he believed strongly that the introduction of the English language into India would gradually help to spread the knowledge of Christianity among the Indian people. The introduction of English education, he suggested,

“would silently undermine, and at length subvert, the fabric of error, and the ultimately idolatry with all . . . its false principles and corrupt practices . . . its ridiculous ceremonies and degrading superstitions, its lying legend, and fraudulent impositions would fall. The reasonable service of the only and infinitely perfect God, would be established.”



Like Charles Grant, Zachary Macaulay (father of Lord Macaulay) and William Wilberforce, philanthropist, who proposed to add two clauses to the East India Company's Charter Act 1793 for sending out school masters to India from England to provide English education here, were also keenly interested in spreading Christianity through English education. Also, having been instigated by Charles Grant, Wilberforce proposed to introduce a bill with certain specific measures for the encouragement of missionaries and western education in India though it was vehemently opposed

by other party in the Court of Directors. English language in India, in its introduction, was known as 'Christian tongue'.

The first impact of the European missionaries was felt in Bengal at the close of the sixteenth century. The Jesuit missionaries came to Bengal with the Portuguese captain and pirates and forcibly converted many people to Roman Catholicism. But they could not build any Roman Catholic Missionary in Bengal. The Christian mission started as an organized movement in Bengal with the arrival of British Protestant missionaries in the last decade of the 18th century. The great Evangelical Revival in contemporary England to preach the gospel to all nations resulted in the formation of quite a few missionary societies. The Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) formed in 1792, 1795 and 1799 respectively were the major ones. The first two were non-conformist bodies and the third was Anglican.

The most significant aim of the missionary was to convert people to Christianity. Dr. D. O. Allen, a distinguished missionary of the American Board says that "Missionaries should educate the people, in order to make them capable of understanding and appreciating the facts and evidences the doctrines and duties of the Scriptures". Missionaries had to demeanor schools for converted population, which mostly came from the lowest and illiterate rung of the Hindu Society. The missionaries established schools at various places in the country among them the Danish mission worked hard and established schools in and around Madras. The Serampore Trio- Joshua Marshman, William Carey, William Ward- and other missionaries started schools under the guidance of Kiernander and Dr. Carey in Bengal. But their main goal was to preach Christianity in Bengal. G.E Smith in his article entitled "Patterns of Missionary Education: the Baptist India Mission, 1794-1824" appeared in the Baptist Quarterly in July 1964 argued that the educational program undertaken by the Srerampore Trio was an unwelcome step. He took instance from Carey's letter from Madanbati (1798) in which he wrote "Our school now consists of 21 children who every day write and read to us some portion of the Scriptures, join us in the morning worship, sing hymns very pleasantly, and improve considerably in writing".

Private English schools had been growing up in Calcutta since the 1770, but by 1813 the main promoters of the English schools have become missionary societies. In Calcutta Aratoon, Piidrus, Griffith, Archur, Drummond, and Sherburne started their separate 'private schools' to impart English education to the students under them. Some of the private schools were Sherburne's School at Jorasanko, Dharmatala Academy founded by David Drummond. Bradely Brit in his "Poems of Derozio" comments

"The sudden intellectual awakening in Bengal and the consequent demand education had called into existence many private schools. Most of these private schools, whence emerged many distinguished men of the day were set on foot by Anglo-Indians who seized this new profession as a god send. In these schools Anglo- Indian and India students sat side by side, their interest for the moment identical- the eager pursuit of knowledge that should equip them in their struggle to keep pace with the rapid progress of the times."

These schools were the places from where the students received the preliminary lessons in English language.

In 1813, missionaries got free entry to enter into India and carry out its activities. So it was obvious that missionaries would promulgate Christianity all the way through English education. In Charter act of 1813 the East India Company did not cite the language of education. On the other hand, East India Company and Government encouraged missionaries to open English schools. The Act stated

that money was to be paid to the “improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learnt natives of India.” Later on, in Anglicists- Orientalists controversy, when Orientalists cited this provision Macaulay interpreted literature as ‘English literature’ and erudite native of India as ‘English learned scholars. Here, it is embedded that how the British used the acts for their own sake.

Since 1813, missionaries became active in India to educate Indians and taught them a new language that is English, inculcate in them a new culture that is Western and convert them into a new religion that is Christianity. Moreover, East India Company and the British Government not only allowed them a free entry but also encouraged them to open schools. Between 1815 and 1840 numbers of missionary schools were established in different parts of India. For instance, the Baptist Mission Schools (1815), the Serampore College (1818), the London Mission Society’s Schools the Bishop’s College (1818), the Bishop’s College at Sibpur in Bengal (1820), the Culcutta School Society’s Schools (1819), the Jaya Narayan Ghoshal’s English School at Benares (1818).

The first Protestant Missionary came to Bengal was Rev. John Zachariah Kiernander from the Royal Danish Mission having been invited by Robert Clive in 1758. He with the help of Portuguese Roman Catholicism opened a school. English was the medium of instruction and in the schools established by the missionaries. Some missions established a complete English system of education. People also worked with the high class Indian reckoned that learning and having command over English language meant the availability of good job opportunities. But, indeed, initially with a religious view English had been introduced in India, especially in Bengal with the hand of the missionaries.

The two members of the Church Missionary Society who made the greatest contribution to English education were Daniel Corrie and Thomas Thomason. Credit goes to Thomas Thomason especially for having devised in 1814, the first detailed comprehensive plan for education in Bengal Presidency, involving the establishment of a Government ‘High School’ district for the teaching of English and modern science.

The Church of Scotland started its mission in Bengal decades later in 1830 under Alexander Duff (1806-1878). Alexander Duff, the first missionary to Bengal sent by the Church of Scotland, established the General Assembly’s Institution (1830). He was very active in establishing missionary schools in 1830 to 1843. In his notion English education was the major instrument to prepare the educated persons in India for the right type of Christianity. Gerardine MacPherson in his *Life of Lal Behari Day* writes that “On reaching his destination, Dr. Duff determined to open a school in Calcutta, in which healthy secular education had its place alongside instruction in Christian religion.”

Duff started teaching in English though he made it compulsory for his students to get knowledge in their own vernacular language. English was important as the official language of Education. Charles Trevelyan and Lord Macaulay supported idea of English language education. But all major works of Hindus had been produced in Sanskrit. English language was only alternative to open the door to the whole west with underlying Christian orientations. In India battle raged between the Orientalists and Anglicists. The Anglicists advocated English as the substance of instruction. To Thomas Babington Macaulay, an Anglicist, English education would create a class of people “Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” In 1836, he wrote “It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up there will not be a single idolator among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years later.” But the Orientalists’ view was one of synthesis between Western and Eastern culture- “a union of Hindu and European Science and Literature on the carefully tended tree of Indian culture”, as commented by Arthur Mayhew. One of the most notable Orientalists was Warren Hastings. Governor Hastings (1772-85) had respect for Indian

traditions and culture, hence he encouraged oriental learning. But on the other hand, missionaries at this point in time were interested in converting Indian minds through religious English education. It is therefore, missionaries criticized the policy of the Governor. It led to distant relationship between the government and missionaries. Between 1792 and 1813 East India Company did not allow missionaries to work within its territories. However, the Orientalists were then defeated by Lord Bentinck in 1835, with the English Education Act 1835. Duff looked back these years and wrote that

“It now appeared that the choice could only lie between . . . Sanskrit . . . and English. The determination of this choice involved the decision of one of the momentous practical questions connected with the ultimate evangelization of India. . . . The question was 'Which shall hereafter be established as the language of learning in India? Which will prove the most effective instrument of a large, liberal and enlightened education? The wrong response to so vital a question, at the outset, would have greatly retarded . . . every subsequent movement.’”

Duff had gone on to present how, in face of apparently irresistible opposition, he had been able to carry through his goals.

“It would seem at first view,” he carried on, “that there could be no room for hesitation. All arguments and authority... seemed exclusively in favor of Sanskrit. The Supreme Government ... all learned Orientalists... some of the oldest and most experienced Missionaries... were decided in its favor yet it was in the face of the highest authorities...that the resolution was taken . . . wholly to repudiate the Sanskrit . . . and openly and fearlessly to proclaim the English the most effective medium of Indian illumination.”

The establishment of Hindu college attracted great attention from the missionaries from the beginning. R. May, a member of the London Missionary Society praised it just after its establishment, “When I was last at Calcutta, I visited the Hindoo College, in which there are now more than fifty youths, . . . who are making considerable progress in the English language.” After a full account of the Hindu College the L.M.S expressed a firm belief that the diffusion of English learning would certainly “prepare the way for. . . future reception of Christianity.” Additionally, R. May also established a board in 1816 under which twenty schools were founded. In those schools approximately one thousand eight hundred students were given preliminary education in English.

The *Samachar Darpan*, a Bengali weekly newspaper published by the Baptist Missionary Society and published on 23 May 1818 from the Baptist Mission Press at Serampore in the first half of the 19th century, commenting on the annual examination of the Hindoo College writes in 1828 that

“Formerly the English believed that the Indian pick up a smattering of English here and there just enough for serving as a clerk. But it now transpires that they are learning English like their own language.”

The *Samachar Darpan* writes again in 1829 that “we now find with surprise that Indian boys venture to study the most advanced texts and the most abstruse subjects in English and have mastered even the most difficult branches of English learning.”

The missionaries produced more periodicals in English than in Bengali. The Serampore Missionaries started their *Monthly Circular Letters* in 1808. It was replaced in April 1818 by their *The Friend of India*. Another “Quarterly Friend of India” was started in 1820, edited by Joshua Marshman. But the year 1837 evidenced the death of Joshua Marshman and this resulted to the establishment of

the last of the series of English schools which were founded in this period, Bhowanipore Institution by the London Missionary Society.

Not only Calcutta, the centre of Bengal, but also the districts were influenced by the missionaries as far as the English education is concerned. After the publication of Bentick's minute and the foundation of the Calcutta Medical College, there began actually a race among the dwellers of the districts to start schools and colleges by the help of the missionaries to learn English. As a result the Krishnanagar English school was born in 1835 and the Hooghly College in 1836. In Murshidabad also, the capital of Bengal in the days of the Nawab, was founded an English school on the subscriptions of the rich and the poor. The English academies in Medinipur Barishal, Chittagong, Santipur, Barasta, Howrah and other places were the important news of the time.

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